



Analyzing Diasporic Ambivalence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

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ABSTRACT

The present research is an attempt to explore diasporic ambivalence in Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees*. The entire novel is about lives of Kostas family, who migrate from Cyprus to England to protect themselves from violence and bloodshed. It is a serious work, depicting issues faced by the diaspora community with love-hate relationships simultaneously. Diaspora studies consist of literary writings which revolve around lives of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers in a foreign land. The novel under the present research depicts diasporic ambivalence of Cypriot characters who express a love-hate relationship for Cyprus as well as England. They flee Cyprus because it is unworthy of residence and prefer England to their homeland, Cyprus. After facing untoward circumstances therein, they recall Cyprus and idealize her in their daily life. In all, their lives are caught between two lands, causing psychological problems for Kostas, Defne and their daughter, Ada. They become asocial, superstitious, introverted, and alienated. Memories of their ancestral land bring about psychic wounds, making them the threshold of an identity crisis. This motivates Kostas family to return to their homeland, Cyprus, in search of normalcy. The study of diasporic ambivalence is very important as it suggests that readers should help stabilize their homeland lest they should flee their country.

Key Words: *The Island of Missing Trees*, diaspora, ambivalence, civil war, Cyprus

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1. INTRODUCTION

Diaspora has emerged as one of the central concerns of postcolonial literary studies because it examines the multifaceted experiences of displacement, identity negotiation, cultural memory and belonging among migrant communities. Contemporary diasporic narratives increasingly depict migration not merely as a geographical relocation but as a continuous process of psychological and cultural negotiation in which individuals struggle to reconcile their attachment to their homeland with the realities of life in the host country. Such experiences frequently generate contradictory emotions of belonging and estrangement, giving rise to what may be described as diasporic ambivalence. Despite the growing body of scholarship on diaspora and postcolonial identity, diasporic ambivalence remains comparatively underexplored as an independent critical category, particularly in contemporary literary fiction.

Existing research on Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) has examined the novel from diverse perspectives including displacement, ecocriticism, hybridity, transgenerational trauma, memory and postcolonial identity. These studies have significantly contributed to understanding the novel's representation of migration and cultural conflict. Nevertheless, they have paid relatively little attention to the contradictory emotional, psychological and cultural attachments experienced by diasporic subjects who simultaneously negotiate love and alienation toward both their homeland and adopted country. Consequently, the dynamics of diasporic ambivalence and its role in shaping identity formation remain insufficiently investigated. This gap provides the primary motivation for the present study.

The present research investigates diasporic ambivalence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* through William Safran's theory of diaspora presented in *Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* (1991). Safran conceptualizes diaspora as the dispersion of individuals or communities from their ancestral homeland while maintaining a collective memory, emotional attachment and an enduring aspiration for return. These characteristics provide a valuable theoretical foundation for understanding the emotional and psychological complexities experienced by displaced communities. Furthermore, the study acknowledges Homi K. Bhabha's conception of ambivalence as a postcolonial condition characterized by contradictory identities and unstable cultural affiliations. Together, these theoretical perspectives facilitate a comprehensive examination of how diasporic identities are continuously negotiated between memory and belonging, loss and hope, homeland and hostland.

Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* has been selected for this study because it offers a compelling literary representation of the long-term consequences of forced migration following the Cyprus conflict. Through the experiences of Kostas, Defne, Ada and the symbolic fig tree, the novel portrays the enduring psychological effects of exile, nostalgia, fragmented identity and cultural dislocation across generations. Rather than presenting migration solely as a physical movement from one geographical location to another, the narrative foregrounds the emotional tensions and identity conflicts that accompany diasporic existence. The novel therefore provides an appropriate literary text for examining the manifestations of diasporic ambivalence within a postcolonial framework.

The originality of this research lies in its exclusive focus on diasporic ambivalence as the principal analytical framework. While previous researchers have primarily emphasized displacement, hybridity, ecological consciousness, trauma and post-memory, the present study



demonstrates that ambivalence constitutes a distinct psychological and cultural condition that profoundly shapes the characters' identities, relationships and perceptions of belonging. By foregrounding contradictory emotional attachments toward both Cyprus and England, the study extends existing scholarship on Shafak's fiction and offers a new perspective on the relationship between diaspora, identity, and postcolonial consciousness.

The significance of this research extends beyond the interpretation of a single literary text. The study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by demonstrating that diasporic ambivalence represents a significant dimension of identity formation in migrant communities. It further enriches diaspora studies by illustrating how displacement produces simultaneous experiences of attachment and alienation that continue to influence individuals across generations. Moreover, the research provides a deeper understanding of the psychological consequences of forced migration and highlights the importance of literary narratives in exploring the complexities of cultural memory, belonging and identity negotiation in an increasingly globalized world.

Against this background, the present study seeks to explore the manifestations of diasporic ambivalence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* and to examine how such ambivalence shapes the psychological experiences and identity formation of its principal characters through the theoretical perspectives of William Safran's theory of diaspora and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research objectives and questions.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To explore manifestations of diasporic ambivalence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*
- To investigate impact of diasporic ambivalence on characters' psyche in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*

1.2. Research Questions

- What makes Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* a study of diasporic ambivalence?
- How do diasporic situations bring about psychic issues for the characters in Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees*?

1.3. Research Statement

A casual look at Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* is enough to indicate that this work may be analyzed from the perspective of diasporic ambivalence as presented by William Safran in his renowned work titled *Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* (1991).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature provides the theoretical and scholarly background for the present study by examining previous research on Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* and the broader concepts of diaspora, hybridity, nostalgia, double consciousness and ambivalence. While these concepts have frequently been examined within postcolonial literary criticism, their interrelationship has not been sufficiently theorized in existing works on Shafak's novel. More importantly, **diasporic ambivalence** has generally been treated as a subsidiary aspect of displacement or hybridity rather than as an independent analytical framework. Therefore, the present review identifies the existing research gap and establishes the need for a separate investigation of diasporic ambivalence.





William Safran (1991) conceptualizes diaspora as the dispersion of individuals or communities from their homeland while retaining a collective memory, emotional attachment and an aspiration for return. These defining characteristics explain the emotional bond that diasporic communities maintain with their homeland despite geographical separation. However, diaspora is not merely a condition of displacement; it also generates complex psychological experiences that shape identity formation. Living between two cultural spaces often produces contradictory feelings of attachment and alienation, thereby giving rise to diasporic ambivalence. Consequently, diaspora provides the historical and social condition within which ambivalence develops.

Closely associated with diaspora is Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, which explains the emergence of identities negotiated between indigenous and host cultures. Hybridity rejects fixed cultural identities and instead emphasizes cultural interaction, negotiation and transformation. Such negotiations frequently create unstable identities in which diasporic subjects neither fully assimilate into the host culture nor completely detach themselves from their homeland. This in-between condition naturally generates ambivalence because individuals simultaneously experience belonging and estrangement in relation to both cultural spaces.

Similarly, nostalgia constitutes another important dimension of diasporic experience. Rather than functioning merely as sentimental remembrance, nostalgia reconstructs an idealized image of the homeland and strengthens emotional attachment to the past. Nevertheless, the homeland is also remembered as a site of violence, conflict, and displacement. This contradictory perception transforms nostalgia into a source of psychological conflict, reinforcing diasporic ambivalence. The simultaneous idealization and rejection of the homeland therefore become defining characteristics of diasporic identity.

The concept of double consciousness further enriches the understanding of diasporic ambivalence. Originally developed by W. E. B. Du Bois and later employed in postcolonial studies, double consciousness refers to the experience of perceiving oneself through multiple cultural identities simultaneously. Diasporic individuals continuously negotiate between inherited cultural traditions and the values of the host society, resulting in divided loyalties and fragmented identities. Such dual consciousness does not merely reflect cultural plurality; rather, it intensifies the contradictory emotional experiences that characterize diasporic ambivalence.

These theoretical perspectives demonstrate that diaspora, hybridity, nostalgia and double consciousness are interconnected concepts that collectively contribute to the formation of diasporic ambivalence. Diaspora provides the condition of displacement, hybridity explains cultural negotiation, nostalgia sustains emotional attachment to the homeland and double consciousness illustrates divided identity. Together, these experiences culminate in ambivalence, which represents the simultaneous coexistence of attachment and detachment, belonging and alienation, hope and loss. Therefore, diasporic ambivalence deserves independent scholarly investigation because it synthesizes these interconnected experiences into a distinct psychological and cultural condition rather than functioning merely as a by-product of migration.

Within the context of *The Island of Missing Trees*, Sabbah and Aynningtyas (2022) examine the issues of diaspora and displacement following the Cyprus conflict. Their study explains the characteristics of diasporic communities and explores themes of displacement, nostalgia, and cultural loss experienced by Kostas and Defne. Although the study provides valuable insights into migration and exile, it primarily focuses on displacement and does not examine the contradictory emotional attachments that constitute diasporic ambivalence.





Shagufta, S. N., and Fiza (2016) analyze the novel from an ecocritical perspective by investigating the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Their research foregrounds environmental consciousness and demonstrates how nature reflects human suffering and resilience. However, the study does not explore the psychological complexities of diasporic identity or the ambivalent relationship between homeland and hostland.

In her review published in *The Guardian*, Leone Ross interprets *The Island of Missing Trees* as a narrative of love, belonging, and memory. She emphasizes the novel's multiple narrators, emotional depth, and intergenerational trauma resulting from the Cyprus conflict. Although the review highlights nostalgia and emotional attachment, it does not critically examine ambivalence as a defining characteristic of diasporic identity.

Sharma and Jha (2023) investigate the concept of postmemory and demonstrate how trauma, grief, silence, and nostalgia are transmitted across generations. Their findings establish that inherited memories significantly influence the identity formation of second-generation migrants. While their study contributes to understanding transgenerational trauma, it does not analyze how these inherited memories generate contradictory feelings of belonging and alienation associated with diasporic ambivalence.

Iqbal and Babar (2023) employ Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and Third Space to examine bicultural identity in the novel. They argue that Ada develops a hybrid identity while negotiating Greek, Turkish, and British cultural influences. Although hybridity explains cultural negotiation, the study does not investigate how such negotiations simultaneously produce conflicting emotional attachments toward both homeland and host society. Consequently, the dimension of diasporic ambivalence remains underexplored.

The foregoing review demonstrates that previous scholarship has extensively examined *The Island of Missing Trees* from the perspectives of displacement, diaspora, hybridity, ecocriticism, postmemory and transgenerational trauma. Nevertheless, none of these studies has systematically investigated diasporic ambivalence as an independent analytical framework or sufficiently theorized its relationship with diaspora, hybridity, nostalgia and double consciousness. This omission constitutes a significant research gap. Accordingly, the present study addresses this gap by examining diasporic ambivalence as a distinct postcolonial condition that shapes identity formation, psychological experience and cultural belonging in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research design to examine diasporic ambivalence in Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees*. Qualitative textual analysis is considered appropriate for this research because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of literary meanings, symbolic representations, and psychological dimensions embedded within the selected text. The study primarily focuses on understanding how diasporic identities are constructed, negotiated and destabilized through narrative representation.

3.1. Research Design

This research follows a descriptive-analytical design. It describes the textual elements related to diaspora and ambivalence and then analyzes them through established postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The descriptive phase identifies relevant textual evidence, while the analytical phase interprets these elements in relation to diasporic identity formation and psychological conflict.



3.2. Data Source

The primary data for this study is Elif Shafak's novel *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021). The novel is selected because it provides a rich representation of migration, memory and identity crisis across multiple generations. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, books, research papers and critical reviews related to diaspora studies, postcolonial theory and Elif Shafak's fiction. These sources are used to establish theoretical grounding and identify the research gap.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study is grounded in William Safran's theory of diaspora and Homi K. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence. William Safran conceptualizes diaspora as the dispersion of communities from their ancestral homeland while maintaining a collective memory, emotional attachment and a symbolic desire for return. This framework helps in understanding how characters in the novel remain psychologically and emotionally connected to Cyprus despite physical relocation to England.

In addition, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence provides a crucial postcolonial lens for interpreting identity formation in diasporic contexts. Bhabha argues that colonial and postcolonial identities are never stable or fixed; instead, they are characterized by contradiction, hybridity, and emotional instability. Ambivalence, in Bhabha's terms, refers to the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from cultural identities, where the subject occupies an in-between or "third space" of negotiation. This theoretical perspective is operationalized in the present study by examining how characters in the novel simultaneously express attachment to and alienation from both Cyprus and England. Their identities are interpreted as fluid and divided rather than unified, revealing the psychological tension produced by diasporic existence.

By combining Safran's structural understanding of diaspora with Bhabha's psychological and cultural theory of ambivalence, this study develops a comprehensive framework for analyzing diasporic identity as both a collective condition and an individual psychological experience.

3.4. Procedure of Analysis

The procedure of analysis involves a close reading of selected textual excerpts from *The Island of Missing Trees*. Relevant passages are identified based on their representation of migration, memory, identity conflict, and emotional duality. These excerpts are then categorized thematically under key concepts such as nostalgia, displacement, cultural memory, psychological trauma and identity negotiation.

Each selected passage is analyzed in light of the theoretical framework. Safran's theory is used to interpret the characters' enduring attachment to their homeland while Bhabha's concept of ambivalence is used to examine their contradictory emotional and psychological responses toward both Cyprus and England. The analysis also focuses on narrative techniques, symbolism and character development to demonstrate how diasporic ambivalence is constructed at the textual level.

3.5. Theoretical Framework

Diaspora refers to the forced or voluntary dispersion of individuals or communities from their original homeland due to political, social, economic or environmental factors. Such displacement not only leads to geographical relocation but also results in emotional fragmentation, cultural dislocation, and psychological instability. Diasporic communities typically include migrants, refugees, expatriates and displaced populations who live at the margins of their host societies while maintaining symbolic connections to their homeland.



William Safran (1991) defines diaspora communities as those who have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to multiple peripheral or foreign regions. He further emphasizes that these communities retain a collective memory, shared identity and a continued belief in their ancestral homeland as their true home. Safran states that diaspora communities preserve "a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland, its physical location, history, and achievements" and regard it as their ideal place of belonging (Safran, 1991, p. 83).

Building upon this structural understanding, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of ambivalence provides a postcolonial extension to diaspora studies. Bhabha argues that colonial and postcolonial identities are formed in a state of tension, where the subject is neither fully integrated nor completely separated from cultural influences. Ambivalence, in this context, refers to the coexistence of opposing emotional responses such as love and rejection, belonging and alienation, familiarity and estrangement. This produces a hybrid or "in-between" identity located in what Bhabha terms the "third space."

In the present study, Bhabha's concept of ambivalence is operationalized through the analysis of characters' psychological and emotional contradictions in *The Island of Missing Trees*. Instances where characters express simultaneous attachment to and rejection of Cyprus and England are interpreted as manifestations of ambivalence. Similarly, identity conflicts, nostalgic longing and cultural dislocation are examined as expressions of hybrid identity formation within the postcolonial condition.

Thus, the combined use of Safran and Bhabha enables a multi-layered interpretation of diasporic experience that accounts for both collective memory and individual psychological conflict.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data analysis of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) is conducted through William Safran's theory of diaspora, particularly his conceptualization of diasporic displacement and the enduring psychological attachment to homeland (Safran, 1991). Rather than treating the novel as a linear migration narrative, this study reads it as a complex literary construction of postcolonial identity formation, where memory, trauma, and belonging are continuously negotiated across Cyprus and England.

A key concern of the novel is not only physical displacement caused by civil conflict in Cyprus, but also the symbolic fragmentation of identity among its characters. Kostas, for instance, does not simply "remember" Cyprus; Cyprus becomes a recurring psychological and imaginative structure that disrupts his present life in England. His statement, 'It has been many years since I fled that place... never to return' (Shafak, 2021, p. 9), functions less as narrative information and more as a figurative marker of rupture, signalling exile as an unfinished emotional condition rather than a completed act of migration.

The analysis of diasporic identity in the novel is strengthened when read through its narrative voice structure. Shafak employs a multi-layered narration, most notably through the fig tree, which destabilizes conventional human-centered storytelling. The fig tree operates as a symbolic witness and non-human narrator, embodying ecological memory and postcolonial displacement simultaneously. Its claim, 'I was, if truth be told, smuggled on to the European continent' (Shafak, 2021, p. 35), extends the metaphor of migration beyond humans, suggesting that displacement is both material and symbolic. This narrative strategy shifts the novel from mere storytelling into allegorical critique of forced mobility and cultural transplantation.





Rather than functioning as descriptive background, Cyprus is repeatedly constructed through figurative language that oscillates between pastoral idealization and violent rupture. Kostas's memory of 'golden beaches, turquoise waters' (Shafak, 2011, p. 10) is not a factual recall but a symbolic reconstruction of homeland as an imagined paradise. This romanticization is critically undercut by the historical violence of civil war, creating a dual image of Cyprus as both utopian memory and traumatic site. Such contradiction is central to postcolonial identity formation in the novel, where homeland exists simultaneously as loss and longing.

Ada's character further intensifies this fragmented identity through linguistic and cultural dislocation. Her inability to speak Greek or Turkish (Shafak, 2021, p. 19-20) is not merely a familial decision but a symbolic erasure of cultural continuity. The novel uses language as a figurative marker of belonging, where English becomes both shelter and site of alienation. Ada's psychological instability is therefore not simply personal trauma but a representation of second-generation diasporic identity negotiating inherited silence and historical absence.

The fig tree also functions as a central symbol of ecological postcoloniality. It mirrors human displacement by experiencing alienation in foreign soil while retaining memory of its native environment. This non-human perspective expands the narrative voice into a posthuman framework, where trauma is distributed across species and environments. The tree's reflection that it is 'no longer a happy tree' (Shafak, 2021, p. 56) becomes a metaphor for the transformation of identity under migration, where continuity is replaced by fragmented becoming.

Across the novel, figurative language repeatedly constructs migration as psychological fracture rather than physical relocation. Expressions of numbness, silence, and emotional suspension—such as 'resignation into a sense of numbness' (Shafak, 2021, p. 40)—indicate that diasporic identity is shaped through affective breakdown rather than linear adaptation. However, earlier sections of the analysis tended to describe these events narratively; a more critical reading shows that Shafak deliberately constructs these emotional states as textual representations of postcolonial subjectivity rather than simple psychological effects.

3.7. Discussion

In comparison with existing diaspora scholarship, *The Island of Missing Trees* aligns with earlier theoretical claims that migration produces hybrid and unstable identities, yet it extends these arguments by embedding diaspora within ecological and non-human narration. While prior studies of diasporic fiction often emphasize nostalgia and cultural duality, Shafak's novel complicates this framework by distributing memory and trauma across both human and non-human narrators, particularly through the fig tree.

The findings of this study confirm Safran's notion of sustained homeland attachment (Safran, 1991), but also diverge from more traditional interpretations that treat diaspora primarily as a human sociocultural condition. Instead, the novel constructs identity formation as a multi-layered process involving narrative voice, symbolism, and environmental consciousness. This approach aligns partially with postcolonial literary criticism that views identity as fragmented and relational, but the novel advances this further by giving narrative authority to a non-human entity. Compared to earlier research that often reads Shafak's work through themes of multicultural coexistence, this analysis highlights that coexistence in the novel is not harmonious but structurally unstable. The symbolic opposition between Cyprus and England is not resolved through integration but remains suspended, reinforcing the idea that postcolonial identity is perpetually incomplete. Furthermore, unlike many previous interpretations that focus on plot-level migration





experiences, this study emphasizes figurative language, narrative voice, and symbolism as primary tools through which diasporic consciousness is constructed.

Overall, the study demonstrates that *The Island of Missing Trees* should be read less as a narrative of migration and more as a layered postcolonial text in which identity is continuously produced through symbolic fragmentation, ecological narration, and unstable memory structures.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* extends beyond a narrative of displacement to illuminate the complex emotional and psychological textures of diasporic existence. Rather than offering a resolved picture of migration, the novel foregrounds the persistent instability of belonging where homeland and host land remain emotionally charged yet incomplete spaces of identification. The Kostas family's experience of Cyprus and England demonstrates that diaspora consciousness is shaped less by physical relocation and more by enduring emotional oscillation, where memory, fear, attachment and alienation coexist without resolution. This unsettled condition not only shapes individual subjectivities but also reflects broader patterns of postcolonial displacement marked by historical violence and forced migration.

From a critical standpoint, the study contributes to postcolonial literary criticism by reinforcing how contemporary fiction revisits colonial legacies through affective and psychological registers rather than purely political ones. It highlights how Shafak reconfigures diaspora not as a linear journey of assimilation but as an ongoing negotiation of fragmented identity, thereby expanding theoretical understandings of hybridity and double consciousness. For diaspora studies, the novel underscores the importance of examining emotional geographies like nostalgia, trauma and ambivalence as central to migrant experience. Ultimately, the text invites readers to reconsider diaspora as a condition of perpetual in-betweenness where belonging is continuously imagined, lost and reimagined rather than securely attained.

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